
The Teachers Institute Approach to Supporting Teaching and Increasing Retention

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School district officials often cite high teacher turnover in schools serving disadvantaged students as a key challenge in their efforts to improve achievement and reduce the achievement gap. Teacher turnover can be detrimental to instructional quality, and replacing teachers requires financial resources that could otherwise support classroom teaching.

The Teachers Institute approach to professional development is designed to strengthen teaching in high-need public schools through university-school partnerships in which university faculty and public school teachers work collaboratively in seminars on topics suggested by teachers. Developers of the Teachers Institute approach expect that by increasing collegiality among district teachers and university faculty, by providing teachers with opportunities for leadership while they remain in the classroom, and by increasing teachers' confidence in their teaching, the Institute will increase the likelihood that teachers will remain teaching in their current district and school.¹ Surveys of participants confirm that their experiences in the Institute seminars have supported their commitment to teaching in high-needs public schools.

This article describes the scope of teacher turnover in the U.S., identifies the key factors that research shows are associated with high teacher turnover, and presents evidence that the Teachers Institute approach to professional development can promote higher teacher retention.

High Teacher Turnover Rates Impede Progress in Raising Student Achievement in High-Poverty, High-Minority Public Schools.

Teacher turnover rates are relatively high. About 15% of public school teachers leave their school each year, half to teach in another school in the following year and the other half to move out of the teaching profession.

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Turnover is even higher among beginning teachers and teachers in high-poverty public schools. One quarter of beginning teachers leave their school after one year. Of these departing teachers, about 60% move to a different school, and 40% leave teaching. High-poverty public schools lose about 20% of their teachers each year.

Persistent high teacher turnover leads to instructional, financial, and organizational problems that can interfere with trusting relationships between teachers, students, and parents and directly affect student learning. Maintaining high quality instruction is especially difficult when turnover is high. In schools with high teacher turnover, students are taught by a higher proportion of new, inexperienced teachers and teachers who have been reassigned to teach a grade they haven't taught before, both patterns that lead to disruptions in instruction, lower instructional quality, and lower student achievement.

When teacher turnover is high, schools must repeatedly recruit, hire, induct, and develop replacement teachers, all activities that are likely to divert financial resources away from classroom teaching. Thus, schools with high teacher turnover also may have fewer resources for curriculum, materials, and professional development for teachers.

High teacher turnover also may impede the development of strong collegial relationships among teachers, lead to the loss of institutional knowledge, and make teachers reluctant to take on leadership roles. These effects may in turn limit the school's capacity for instructional improvement and limit achievement among all students, not just those whose teachers left.

Poorer Working Conditions Contribute to Lower Teacher Retention Rates in High-Poverty Schools Where a Stable Teaching Staff is Needed Most.

A range of working conditions matter to teachers, but research shows that the most important are the ones that shape the social context for teaching and learning and

make effective teaching possible. Teachers are more likely to stay in schools with supportive principals; schools where teachers network, collaborate regularly, and learn from one another; and schools with a positive work culture, a strong sense of collective responsibility, and norms for behavior and high expectations among fellow teachers and students. Teachers want an intellectually stimulating community in which they can experience a sense of learning, changing, and growing. Status and respect for teachers also influences teacher retention.

Teachers in schools with more low-income students or higher proportions of minority students are more likely than teachers in other schools to report poorer working conditions. New teachers in schools serving disadvantaged students, for example, are less likely than their counterparts in other schools to report receiving mentoring, curriculum support, and collegial support. These poorer working conditions likely contribute to the higher teacher turnover, lower teaching quality, and lower student achievement found in high-poverty and high-minority public schools.

Participation in a Teachers Institute Can Provide Support that May Promote Higher Teacher Retention.

Teachers Institutes create partnerships between school districts and local universities or colleges to provide professional development in a way that offers the kinds of support teachers need to remain teaching in high-poverty, high-minority public schools. Teachers Institutes offer teachers an intellectually stimulating opportunity to learn along with other teachers in their school and district. Institutes are carefully designed to respect and build on the pedagogical expertise that teachers bring to the Institute seminars. The roles of seminar leaders and teachers are defined, and teachers receive a stipend in recognition of their time and effort. Teachers Institutes provide intensive professional development, one of the four components of comprehensive induction programs. The

Institutes also provide curricular support and access to collegial support in improving pedagogical practice.

When working conditions in a school are poor, teachers' experiences in the Teachers Institute seminars may help counterbalance the conditions in their school and provide some of the support they need to remain in their current teaching position. When teachers are unable to develop strong collegial working relationships at their school, the opportunity to work with other district teachers in a Teachers Institute seminar may provide some of the professional interactions and feedback that teachers, especially new teachers, need. The supportive relationships that teachers form often continue beyond the Institute seminars.

Due to the fact that my experience in the Institute program has been such a positive one I would like to continue the process of curriculum development and to encourage other teachers to participate and reap these benefits as well. It is my intention to remain at my school district as a classroom teacher for the foreseeable future.

By providing opportunities for leadership without leaving the classroom, the Teachers Institutes also may facilitate leadership in other school-wide decision-making and increase the likelihood that teachers remain teaching in their present school. Teachers Institutes have sparked some teachers' interest in curriculum and led them to participate in school or district committees addressing curriculum issues. Other teachers have reported that serving as a Teacher Representative or seminar Coordinator has helped them develop leadership skills and apply them in their school, thereby gaining their principal's recognition for taking initiative and providing leadership in their school. In one high school where several teachers have participated in the Yale National Initiative, the teachers have stepped into department leadership positions and continue supporting each other and working

together to improve teaching and learning in their school.

By offering teachers the opportunity to learn together in a collegial setting and by facilitating professional relationships among teachers in different schools in the district, the Teachers Institutes may over time build collegial relationships among teachers in a school and in the district that support teacher retention in the school and district.

The focus of teachers' work in the Teachers Institute is the development of a curriculum unit that the teacher can use in his or her classroom the following year. Through this work, teachers take the initiative to improve the curriculum; they fill gaps in the school's curriculum or supplement it with new material that addresses standards.

Every year I make new contacts and connections across the district that serve to give me a stronger sense of a New Haven teaching community. This is a strong factor in why I never left the district, even when other districts were offering more money back when I started teaching.

At the end of their Institute seminar, most teachers report that they expect to remain in teaching in five years, but a few teachers indicate that they expect to take an administrative position, go to graduate school, or retire. Among those who expect to remain in teaching in five years, most expect to remain teaching in their school (68% to 82% across Institutes in 2014) or in their district (9% to 16% across Institutes in 2014).

Some evidence exists showing that Teachers Institutes may increase teacher retention. Among teachers who had participated in the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute during or before the first year of the study (2000-2001), 63% were still teaching in the New Haven School District five years later, compared with 43% of teachers who had not participated in the Institute. After controlling for race, sex, and years of teaching experience, the

analysis showed that teachers who had participated in the Institute by 2000-2001 were almost twice (1.93 times) as likely to remain teaching in the district in 2004-2005.²

Conclusion

Lower teacher retention in high-poverty public schools remains an obstacle to instructional improvement, student achievement gains, and reductions in achievement gaps. Multiple factors influence teachers' decisions to remain teaching at their school and in their district, including factors related to school working conditions, salary, and curriculum. Teachers Institutes address some of these factors by providing an intensive professional development experience that offers curricular support, fosters collegiality and new professional relationships with other teachers in the district, and encourages teacher leadership without leaving the classroom. Teachers who participate in Teachers Institute seminars express a strong commitment to teaching in their school, and data show that they remain at higher rates than other teachers in their districts. More research is needed to reach causal conclusions, but the Teachers Institute is a promising approach that supports teaching in high-poverty public schools not only by increasing teachers' content knowledge and their confidence in teaching it but also by supporting retention of teachers in their schools and districts.

Notes

This article presents principal findings from a longer report with complete citations that can be found online at teachers.yale.edu. A large number of references were reviewed during preparation of the report and this article.

1. Kisker, Ellen Eliason. (2011). The Teachers Institute Theory of Change. *On Common Ground*, Number 14, pp. 4-7.
2. Smith, Rogers M. (2009). *To Strengthen Teaching: An Evaluation of Teachers Institute Experiences*. Philadelphia: Rogers Smith.